



PIVOTING STABILISATION IN THE SAHEL: COMPETING VISIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION CHECKPOINTS



By Delina Goxho (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/expert-author/delina-goxho/>) (2 June 2021)
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EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell has recently announced greater transparency from
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%A9enne-renonce-%C3%A0-verser-une-partie-de-son-aide-au-mali) Sahelian leaders following a visit to the region (https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/97174/high-representative-josep-borrell-visit-mauritania-chad-and-mali-21-24-april-2021_lv) in April. This follows intentions for mutual accountability between the EU and Sahelian capitals and a “civilian surge” on the part of the EU, as outlined in the new European Strategy for the Sahel (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/04/19/sahel-council-approves-conclusions-on-the-eu-s-integrated-strategy-in-the-region/>). Both these concepts are closely connected with “stabilisation” – a word that is mentioned approximately 20 times in the Strategy. Pinning down not just the meaning of this word but also how the EU wishes to implement such stabilization strategy is paramount to ultimately obtaining better living conditions and security for Sahelian citizens.

Read the full text below.

This commentary was first published as a blogpost at Security Praxis (<https://securitypraxis.eu/pivoting-stabilisation-in-the-sahel-competing-visions-and-implementation-checkpoints/>).

PIVOTING STABILISATION IN THE SAHEL: COMPETING VISIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION CHECKPOINTS

EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell has recently announced greater transparency from (and better conditionality with) (<https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210511-l-union-europ%C3%A9enne-renonce-%C3%A0-verser-une-partie-de-son-aide-au-mali>) Sahelian leaders following a visit to the region (https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/97174/high-representative-josep-borrell-visit-mauritania-chad-and-mali-21-24-april-2021_lv) in April. This follows intentions for mutual accountability between the EU and Sahelian capitals and a “civilian surge” on the part of the EU, as outlined in the new European Strategy for the Sahel (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/04/19/sahel-council-approves-conclusions-on-the-eu-s-integrated-strategy-in-the-region/>). Both these concepts are closely connected with “stabilisation” – a word that is mentioned approximately 20 times in the Strategy. Pinning down not just the meaning of this word but also how the EU wishes to implement such stabilization strategy is paramount to ultimately obtaining better living conditions and security for Sahelian citizens.

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In less than a year, the Sahel saw four coups d'état, three of which were successful. The first occurred in August 2020: while the European Parliament was passing a report by Spanish MEP Javier Nart (<https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/printficheglobal.pdf?id=709898&l=en>) advocating for more extensive military aid provision to Sahelian states, some elements of the Malian military staged a mutiny and took control of the government. The coup opened the Pandora's box of problematic partnerships and forced European actors to re-examine their relations with Sahelian leaders and reconsider the security-development nexus (<https://africacenter.org/spotlight/eu-security-strategy-sahel-focused-security-development-nexus/>). The second (failed) attempt occurred on 30th March this year in Niamey, the Nigerien capital, where men from special forces intelligence and security units, the CRS, tried to stage a shortlived coup against newly elected President Bazoum. Finally, in April President Déby of Chad, who had ruled the country for three decades, was assassinated, leading to a bloody transition (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/protests-erupt-ndjamena-chadian-protesters-demand-civilian-rule-2021-04-27/>) and a military takeover by the former president's son Mahamat Idriss Déby and the Transition Military Council. Finally, unsatisfied with the government ministerial choices (especially on Security and Defence), on May 24th 2021, the Malian military junta staged a coup inside a coup (<https://twitter.com/tweetsintheME/status/1396910123336048643>) (not even a year since the first coup).

Together with widespread violence, perpetrated both by armed groups and security forces, and continuous protests, these developments are anything but a display of 'stability'. And yet, *stability* is what the new EU Sahel Strategy repeatedly calls for. Clarifying which interpretation of stabilisation the EU chooses to adopt and, most importantly, how it chooses to go about implementing its interpretation of the term will be key to European action in the region (and elsewhere).

The EU Strategy now crystallises the new European long-term vision through, primarily, a stronger focus on governance. This is in itself not novel thinking on the EU's part: a number of analysts (<https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/strategic-missteps-learning-failed-eu-sahel-strategy-28130>) called for more structured political thinking concerning governance last year, and more recently an ISPI piece (<https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/hollowness-governance-talk-and-about-sahel-30026>) eloquently explained how current approaches to this apparently elusive term are still all too hollow. To complete the picture, most recently the EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell admitted that the EU may have signed too many "blank cheques (<https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/04/28/josep-borrell-au-sahel-nous-avons-peut-etre-signé-trop-de-cheques-en-blanc-6078353-3242.html>)" to Sahelian leaders in the past.

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Stabilisation carries weight
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Delving deeper into the Strategy, two new foci emerge: *mutual accountability* and a “*civilian surge*”, both already present in the N'Djamena Communiqué. These elements have already been dissected here (<https://peacelab.blog/2021/04/unpacking-the-eus-new-sahel-strategy>), as they are both part of a European strategy mainly focused on *stabilisation*, which is arguably the overall objective of EU action in the region. But stabilisation is a rather charged term, with a long history and very different interpretations according to which country or institution adopts it. The concept itself is birthed in the military realm following conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990s and subsequent interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. As for its civilian interpretation, after the Kosovo intervention, the EU and Germany launched the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe (https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/stability-pact_en), in order to better integrate the Balkans into the European community.

Competing political visions

In the Sahel Strategy, the European approach to stabilisation is often viewed as deriving from two different and to some extent competing political visions – those of France and Germany.

Germany prioritizes a civilian-oriented approach to stabilisation, as stressed by its 2017 guidelines on *Preventing Crises, Resolving Conflict, Building Peace* (<https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/themen/krisenpraevention/-/231878>). Berlin links the political process to broader stabilisation efforts and considers this to be an endeavor that includes the Ministry of Defence, but is led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Following the demise of the Islamic State in Iraq, stabilisation for Berlin has come to have a specific meaning, distinct from development and security and focused mainly on political dialogue with regional partners. In addition, German stabilisation projects in areas such as the Lake Chad basin bear neither the German flag nor the flag of implementing partners such as UNDP, in order to avoid detracting from the sense of ownership by local governments. This is particularly significant, as ownership is known to be a good predictor of peace (<https://www.routledge.com/Peacebuilding-and-Local-Ownership-Post-Conflict-Consensus-Building/Donais/p/book/9780415741132>) in the long term, despite also being problematic in cases in which local elites have no interest in building long-term stability (which is the case in the Sahel).

France's take on stabilisation, for all the impressive bureaucratic efforts around setting up a Comprehensive approach to the Fragilization of States and Societies

(<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf>

/meae_strategie_fragilites_en_bat_web_cle497968-1.pdf), a Crisis and Support Center

(<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/br-cdc-as-09-09-2015-015202126.pdf>), a Crisis and Support Center (https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/the-ministry-and-its-network/the-crisis-and-support-center/), appears to tackle the issue from

the crisis and support center

a more security-centered angle. The infamous decision to intervene in support (<https://www.france24.com/fr/20190207-nord-tchad-libye-barkhane-intervention-militaire-armee-francaise>) of former Chadian President Déby in the Ennedi bombardments against northern rebels back in 2019 symbolises Paris's stabilisation approach: achieving stability entails fostering strong leadership and a strong military presence. This does not mean that Paris ignores civilian components to stabilisation, or preventive measures and political solutions. The difference between Paris and Berlin approaches lies rather in prioritization: France appears to consider civilian stabilisation components as part of a counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy in the Sahel, whereas for Germany it is COIN that is part of a wider civilian stabilisation approach.

For both institutional and historical reasons, the German approach will most likely be the one that prevails in Brussels, yet this will depend on a number of factors. First and foremost, it will depend on how successful the new EU Strategy will be in the short term, which will be the main strategy of the next EU Special Representative for the region. Last but not least, the approach will depend on whether France and Barkhane expand their reach and push the EU towards a stronger security presence to compensate for potential deficiencies caused by the coup in Chad.

Implementation checkpoints

While the mantra of stabilisation through good governance (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17449057.2019.1640509>) has seeped into EU policy rhetoric on the Sahel, the challenge remains in translating this priority into the field of implementation. Following talk on mutual accountability, ownership and higher expectations on Sahelian leaders, Borrell recently announced that some EU funds to Mali will be diverted (<https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210511-l-union-europ%C3%A9enne-renonce-%C3%A0-verser-une-partie-de-son-aide-au-mali>), given that Bamako had not reached the necessary objectives agreed with the EU back in 2020 (for example on punctual payments for soldiers (<https://peacelab.blog/2021/04/unpacking-the-eus-new-sahel-strategy/>)) Diversion of funds naturally does not mean that they will be cut, but rather devoted instead to elections in Mali and other ad-hoc projects. While this signals a new implementation approach on the part of the EU, problems will persist.

First of all, ex-post/negative conditionality measures, while possibly beneficial in the longer term for redefining relationships (<https://www.csis.org/news/how-improve-return-investment-security-assistance>), may truly pose a challenge to successful implementation.

Negative conditionality imposed retroactively is often perceived by the partner country as a Nous utilisons des cookies pour une meilleure expérience utilisateur ; certains ne peuvent être désactivés. En utilisant ce site, vous acceptez nos conditions d'utilisation et notre politique de confidentialité ([privacy-policy](#)). Si vous n'êtes pas d'accord, merci de ne pas poursuivre sur ce site. diversion of funds and may strain relations (<https://www.euractiv.com/fr/2020/01/la-politique-de-voies-verticales-2020-01-16>) and potentially draw partners such as

Turkey and Russia [close](#)

Secondly, this may lead to foot-dragging, where Sahelian leaders may make commitments without any real intention of meeting them. By the time the EU identifies these failed commitments, funds and political resources may well be exhausted. As effectively put here (<https://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.414/>), “the contradiction with ownership is that owners are both the source of the problem and indispensable to the solution”.

Thirdly, as for more practical implementation, the EU Sahel Strategy recognizes the value of restoring not just state authority (which carries controversial significance), but also basic services to all citizens. In some areas however these services have never even arrived. Focusing more on this aspect, not just as a rhetorical point, but as a true commitment on the part of the EU, is vital to turning the provision of basic services into a reality. This will not go unnoticed: the way the EU and its member states choose to disburse their funds, and to which institutions will define whether the words contained in this Strategy are truly sincere or whether these are merely empty words. The problem is not one of lack of funds, as persuasively outlined here (<https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/hollowness-governance-talk-and-about-sahel-30026>), but how these funds are used and how learning from previous mistakes is ultimately incorporated back into programming (or not).

On a final note: the migration issue remains largely underdeveloped in the Strategy, and the references that are included are deeply problematic. The Strategy only mentions that it wishes to “promote fruitful cooperation [...], building on the constructive partnerships established in recent years” with Sahelian countries, leaving many unresolved problems, as effectively presented here (<https://www.clingendael.org/publication/turning-tide>).

Conclusion

The EU will need to clearly define what it means by *stabilisation* in the Sahel, as this will constitute the building block for all future endeavours in conflict areas. Roger MacGinty in his excellent analysis (<https://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.ab/>) of why stabilisation is not a neutral term states that the “terminological imprecision surrounding *stabilisation* creates a meta-category; full of buzzwords but empty of meaning”. Knowing whether Brussels sees stabilisation through German or French eyes is fundamental to laying the basis for future implementation, which will need to take into account relationship challenges with Sahelian leaders deriving from conditionality measures, political and practical problems with restoring basic services and the wider preoccupations caused by transitions (and coups) in Mali and, most importantly, Chad.

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